

My friends, I would like to talk a little Torah with you tonight. Specifically, my talk tonight is called, “Abraham Shmabraham. What’s So Great About Him?” I gave a D’var Torah last Shabbat morning on essentially the same topic, but the message behind it is too important not to share more than once.

Let us begin by hearing the Torah in a way we do not usually hear it? Why not? Because the first lines I will read comes from the end of one weekly portion, and the last line—the punch line, if you will—begins the next week’s portion, so we are used to this passage being interrupted by a week’s time.

Here is the passage:

*Terah took his son Abram, his grandson Lot the son of Haran, and his daughter-in-law Sarai, the wife of his son Abram, and they set out together from Ur of the Chaldeans for the land of Canaan; but when they had come as far as Haran, they settled there. The days of Terah came to 205 years; and Terah died in Haran. The LORD said to Abram, “Go forth from your native land and from your father’s house to the land that I will show you.*

Do you see the unanswered question? We just read about Terach, Avram, and Lot. We were told about Avram’s brother Nahor in a sentence I did not read. So the question is screamed from the text: why Abraham? What makes him worthy of being the one God chose to spread the word of monotheism?

Maybe you think I am not being fair to Abraham. After all, why did God choose Noah to be the one to repopulate the Earth after the flood? That’s easy—the Noah story opens by telling us that Noah was a righteous man. That is why God chose him.

You might say, “OK, so that covers Noah. But what about Moses? Why did God choose him to lead the Israelites? The Torah does not start by telling us he was righteous, nor anything else about his moral character.”

That is true; the Torah makes no comment about Moses at the beginning of the story like it did about Noah, but by the time God chooses Moses at the Burning Bush, three things have happened: He has killed an Egyptian overseer who was beating a Hebrew slave because there was no one else to protect the slave, he tried to make peace between quarreling Hebrew slaves, and he helped Yitro's daughters when they were being harassed as they tried to water their father's flocks by male shepherds. So no, there is no simple introduction as there was with Noah, but we get a deeper look into the moral character of Moses than we did with Noah. But Abraham? Nothing.

My friends, this cannot be an accident. I believe it is far too significant to be one. However, we have to keep an important point in mind: Sometimes what the Torah does not say is as important as what it does say. For example, the Torah has no theogony in it; no story about the origin of God Himself. This was absolutely revolutionary in the ancient world.

The Torah tells us Noah was righteous, but according to the Torah, who descends from Noah and his family? All of us—the entire world. The first eleven chapters of the Torah are not addressed to the Jews or Israelites. They are universal, applying to all humanity.

Not so with Abraham. He is the patriarch of the Israelites, and ultimately of the Jewish people. This is the people that are to become God's *am segulah*, God's treasured or if you prefer, chosen people. What would it mean if the story of this people began with a statement that their patriarch was the best person God could find?

Simply put, it could lead to one of the greatest evils on the planet, racial bigotry. We could claim that we, the descendants of Abraham, are intrinsically superior to all others because we are Abraham's descendants. The Torah gives us insight into Abraham's character as his story unfolds, but unlike Noah, from whom

the world descended so there is no concern about calling him the most righteous man of his time, but with Abraham, from whom the Jewish people will come, the Torah is unwilling to take the chance.

Why not? Because of how insidious racial prejudice is. It allows no possibility of the others' improvement, because their flaws are part of their makeup. It is certainly no accident that Nazism defined Jews racially, not religiously, because one can change one's religion, but not one's race. It was part of the propaganda campaign to convince people that Jews were less than fully human.

How brilliant, then, is the Torah, for not allowing even the slightest possibility that we can claim to be racially superior because of our ancestors? And the beautiful subtlety of the text—we are not beaten over the head with this message. In fact, we have to read slowly and thoughtfully to see it at all. This is Torah at it's best, my friends, teaching us not only with its words, but demanding that we learn to hear the lessons it makes in silence.